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SUBJECT: SENATOR SPECTER DISCUSSES GAZA, SYRIA, AND IRAN
WITH NETANYAHU AND SENIOR LIKUD PARTY OFFICIALS

Classified By: Ambassador James B. Cunningham for reasons 1.4(b/d).

11. (S) SUMMARY. Senator Arlen Specter (R-PA) and the Ambassador on December 29, 2008 met with Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu and senior Likud Party Knesset Members Silvan Shalom and Yuval Steinitz. Netanyahu conveyed his support for Israel's offensive in the Gaza Strip, adding that the long-range goal would be ridding the area of Iranian influence. All three Likud politicians were pessimistic about prospects for change in Syria, explaining that Syria would continue to align itself with Teheran until the West demonstrated its intent to confront the Iranian regime. They also stressed that Iran remained a time-sensitive issue. Netanyahu advised that if world leaders sought to engage Iran after Iranian elections later this year, they should do so for a short period of time and then act against Teheran with strong sanctions that would include a blockade. Steinitz added that Israel is certain that Iran is pursuing nuclear weapons and claimed that Iran's program could be damaged militarily if that option were required. End Summary.

SUPPORTING OPERATIONS IN GAZA

12. (C) MK Netanyahu told Sen. Specter and the Ambassador that he supported the operations in Gaza, adding that these measures should have been taken a long time ago. "It's better late than never," he said. The short-term goal is stopping rocket launches from Gaza, but Netanyahu stressed that the long-term goal would be removing an "Iranian base" from Israel's periphery. When asked by Sen. Specter if Hamas had shown a capacity to change, MK Shalom explained that the Hamas charter says that the land of Israel belongs to all Muslims, which makes it impossible for Hamas to compromise on behalf of all of Islam. "It is a religious war, not a political conflict as it was with (Yasir) Arafat," according to Shalom.

EXPECTING SYRIA TO REMAIN FIRMLY IN THE IRANIAN CAMP

13. (C) Sen. Specter probed Netanyahu regarding the potential for progress in Israeli-Syrian negotiations. Netanyahu replied that he was more optimistic about progress with Palestinian moderates than he was about Syria. Netanyahu recalled his efforts to talk with the Syrians in the 1990s, but noted that Syria still supports Hamas, Hizballah, and Iran, and they still allow weapons from Iran to be shipped through their country to reach Hizballah. He accused Syrian President Bashar al-Asad of "playing a double game" in which Asad courts the West while having no intentions of breaking with Iran, especially when Asad believes Iran is close to getting nuclear weapons. When asked if there is any way Asad will choose the West over Iran, Netanyahu responded that Asad would align with Western powers if he saw that they were intent on "stopping" Iran. Steinitz added that if Asad were interested in moving away from Iran, Hizballah, and Hamas, he would have done so already, citing former Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat's shift away from the Soviet Union and toward the U.S. prior to reaching a peace accord with Israel.

Steinitz said he felt that USG involvement with Syria could help prod Asad to drift from Iran, but he surmised that Asad was not ready to "pay the price" for contacts with Washington.

PRESSING FOR ACTION ON IRAN

14. (C) Netanyahu stressed that the time for halting Iran's nuclear program is running out. Referring to French President Nicholas Sarkozy's suggestion to avoid talks with Iran until after the Iranian elections, Netanyahu advised that any talks taking place after that time should be of limited duration—two to three months at most. If a solution were not reached at that time, Netanyahu said the West must act with strong sanctions, including a blockade. Sen. Specter asked Netanyahu why he thought a blockade would work and Netanyahu responded that the sharp decrease in oil prices will bring financial hardship to Iran and a blockade could provide the additional pressure on the Iranian regime that would encourage it to halt its nuclear program. In Steinitz's view, Iran would not change its stance unless it saw that "brute force" might be used. "The only chance we have to avoid using force is if we choose a big enough stick and wave it wildly in their faces," he advised, pointing toward Libya's decision to terminate its weapons program following the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

15. (S) Steinitz cautioned his interlocutors not to underestimate Iran's intentions, which he said were clearly directed at attaining a nuclear weapons capability. Steinitz, who is a former Chairman of the Knesset's Subcommittee on Intelligence, said that Israel's intelligence

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collection on this issue is excellent and that Israel knows—rather than simply assesses—that Iran is trying to produce fissile material for nuclear weapons. He compared Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons with the programs Pakistan and India pursued. These two countries produced a limited number of bombs and focused on short- to mid-range ballistic missiles, according to Steinitz. Iran, however, was building enough centrifuges to suggest much greater ambitions, and was pursuing a long-range ballistic missile program. When Sen. Specter asked about the feasibility of striking key nuclear sites in Iran, Steinitz claimed they could be destroyed quite rapidly from the air, citing the "billions" Iran spends on air defenses around nuclear sites as evidence that the nuclear sites are vulnerable.

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